

FOUR ARGUMENTS FOR THE ELIMINATION OF TELEVISION



BY

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The power that television images have to replace imaginary images that you created yourself operates in all realms of external-image information. All of our minds are filled with images of places and times and people and stories with which

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we've never had personal contact. In fact, when you receive information from any source that does not have pictures attached to it, you make up pictures to go with it. They are your images. You create the movie to go with the story. You hear the word "Africa" and a picture comes to mind.

These internal movies can be of historical events and periods, such as the signing of the Declaration of Independence or the age of dinosaurs. They may be of happenings to which we have no direct access, such as life in a primitive village, or of exotic places we have never been—Borneo, China, the moon.

The question is this: Once television provides an image of these places and times, what happens to your own image? Does it give way to the TV image or do you retain it?

Here is a list to check with. Please attempt to bring these to mind:

I have already mentioned China, Africa, Borneo and the moon. How about life under the sea? Life in an Eskimo village? A police shoot-out. An argument among homosexuals. A mugging. Dope smugglers. A Russian village. A preoperation conference of doctors. An American farm family. The war room of the Pentagon. Ben Franklin. The Battle of Little Big Horn. The FBI. The Old South. The Crusades. The landing of the Pilgrims. The flight of Amelia Earhart. An emergency ambulance crew. A Stone Age tribe. The raid on Entebbe Airport. Ancient Greece. Ancient Rome. The Old West.

Were you able to come up with images for any or all of these? It is extremely unlikely that you have experienced more than one or two of them personally. Obviously the images were either out of your own imagination or else they were from the media.

Can you identify which was which?

Most of the people in America right now would probably say that the images they carry in their minds of the Old South are from one of two television presentations: *Gone With the*

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Wind and Roots. These were, after all, the two most popular television shows in history, witnessed by more than 130 million people each. And none of the 130 million was actually in the Old South.

Historical periods like the Crusades or the Old West are frequently pictured on television and in films. I have little doubt that most people would call upon their film or TV images if I asked them to bring those periods to mind. How could it be otherwise?

The same applies to the depictions of life-styles. What images do you use to understand the quality of life for lesbians? Or artists? Or farm laborers? Or members of the American Nazi Party? What images do you carry of Eskimo villagers or nomads in the Sahara or Indians in the Amazon?

Like historical periods, or groups of people with whom you are not in personal contact, most current events are also removed from your direct participation. You watch news reports in which Harry Reasoner tells you what is happening politically in China. You watch a congressman explain events in Chile, and then you see a street in Santiago. You see pictures of grounded oil tankers or fighting in Angola or elections in Sweden or scientific testimony on nuclear power.

You don't participate in these things and you can't see them for yourself. The images you have of them are derived from the media, and this becomes the totality of your image bank.

Now let's go a step further.

Please bring to mind a baseball game or a football game. Have you got one? Hold it for a moment.

If you are like most Americans, you *have* actually been to a game. You have seen one directly and probably participated in one personally. You have probably also watched at least one of them on television. Here's the question: Which one did you bring to mind? The television version or the one you experienced directly?

The answers vary on this point, but many people I have asked will report that the television image is the one which springs to mind first, if only because it was the most recent. Most will say the images rotate.

Once images are inside your head, the mind doesn't really distinguish between the image that was gathered directly and the one that derived from television.

Of course you *can* distinguish. When I asked you whether it was a television image or a firsthand image, you were certainly able to identify which was which. But until I asked you, you may not have thought to do that.

Have you ever met movie stars or famous television personalities? Whenever I have met them I have always remarked to myself upon the difference in the personal image they presented and the television or film image. I could recognize them when I saw them in person, I am only saying that it was different. The main point is this: When I think about them now, in retrospect, their television images are just as likely to spring into my mind as their real-life images. I can *decide* to bring up their *real* images if I wish to, but if their names are mentioned in passing conversation, or I read a review of a production they've been in, I am actually more likely to bring up a media image than one of the real person I have met.

Have you ever visited McDonald's? Which images dominate in your mind, those from your actual visit or those from television? They rotate, don't they? They take on a certain equality in your memory banks. You can make the distinction between the direct image and the advertising image, but do you? If for some reason the subject of McDonald's comes up in conversation, which image comes into your mind as you talk? Do you make the distinction? If you are like most people to whom I've asked this question, it is only with great effort that you are able to distinguish which one is the personal experience and which is the television experience. It takes a certain amount of effort to do so; one doesn't ordinarily

bother. The television image can be as real in effect as the personally experienced image.

The mind doesn't automatically distinguish which image is from direct experience and which has been imposed by the media. If I should now ask you to erase the television image of McDonald's, leaving only the reality—the personally experienced direct contact—can you do that? Please make the effort and see if you can.

We are left with a very bizarre phenomenon. Television is capable of dominating personally derived imagery—from books or imagination—and it is also capable, at least some of the time, of causing confusion as to what is real experience and what is television experience. The mind is very democratic about its image banks, all are equally available for our recall and use. And so when we call on our images for whatever purposes we may have for them, we are as likely to produce an implanted image as one which was originally our own.

The root of this unfortunate problem lies with the fact that until very recently, human beings had no need to make distinctions between artificial images of distant events and life directly lived.

The Inherent Believability of All Images

Seeing is believing.

Like many an axiom, this one is literally true. Only since the ascendancy of the media has this been opened to question.

Throughout the hundreds of thousands of generations of human existence, whatever we saw with our eyes was concrete and reliable. Experience was directly between us and the natural environment. Nonmediated. Nonprocessed. Not altered by other humans.

If we saw a flock of birds flying southward, then these birds

were definitely doing that. We could believe in it. We might interpret this concrete information in various ways, perhaps misinterpret it, but there could never have been a question as to whether it was happening. The information itself, the birds and their flight, could not be doubted.

This is the case with all sensory information. Whatever information the senses produce the brain trusts as *inherently* believable. If the sense could not be relied upon, then the world would have been an utterly confusing place. Humans would have been unable to make any sensible choices leading to survival. If there were no concretely true information, there could have been no sane functioning; the species could not have survived. This belief in sense perception is the foundation, the given, for human functioning.

This is not to say there is no illusion.

In a desert environment, as we know, mirage can cause some to believe they are seeing things that are not there. But the humans who are fooled in this way are the humans who are new to that environment. It's a problem of experience and interpretation. Their senses are not yet attuned to the new informational context. People who live for generations in such places learn to allow for illusions and don't actually "see" them in the way that visitors do. They learn to look at the edges of images, like the shadow spaces of Castaneda's Don Juan, and to perceive a reality which is different from the visitor's.

In jungle environments, and among certain creatures, there is camouflage. Animals use it to fool each other, including humans. Humans also use it, or devise image tricks, to fool animals and other humans. In this way images become processed images, deliberately altered, and may serve to fool an observer whose senses and interpretations are not sufficiently sharp.

These are the classical exceptions which prove the point,

because the basis of success for camouflage and illusion is that humans *will* believe what they see. In this sense, camouflage is a kind of sensory jujitsu that only confirms the original point; the senses are inherently believable.

In the modern world, information from the senses cannot be relied upon as before. We attempt to process artificial smells, tastes, sights and sounds as though they could reveal planetary reality, but we cannot make anything of them because we are no longer dealing directly with the planet. The environment itself has been reconstructed into an already abstracted, arbitrary form. Our senses are no longer reacting to information that comes directly from the source. They are reacting to processed information, the manifestation of human minds. Our information is confined in advance to the forms that other humans provide.

Now, with electronic media, our senses are removed a step further from the source. The very images that we see can be altered and are. They are framed, ripped out of context, edited, re-created, sped up, slowed down and interrupted by other images. They arrive from a variety of places on the planet where we are not and were filmed at times which are not the present. What's more, many of the images are totally fictional. The things that we see are not happening and never happened. That is, they happened, but it is only the acting that happened, not the event.

Obviously, in the present age, we ought not rely on images to the same degree that our ancestors relied on the image of flying birds.

Meanwhile, the images proceed inward as though they were the same as natural, unprocessed imagery. They move, walk, talk, and seem real. We assume they are real in the way images have always been real. We are unaware of any alteration. The change is difficult to absorb.

What is required is a doubting process, a sensory cynicism

that would have been profoundly inappropriate, even dangerous, for all previous human history. To assume that some sensory data could be eliminated totally and other sense information made unreliable would have left humans totally confused, lost in space, without knowledge of how to do anything, as though the sensory environment itself had somehow gone mad (*Solaris*). The synapse would be broken. Contact lost. That is the present situation.

We are only the second generation that has had to face the fact that huge proportions of the images we carry in our heads are not natural images which arrived as though they were connected to the planet. Like the Eskimo transplanted to the city, or the Indian from the jungle who must suddenly deal with metallic birds, we do not have the ability to cope. Evolution has not arranged for us to allow for varying degrees of absorption and reliance on visual and aural information. There is nothing in the history of the species which aids our basic senses in understanding that imagery can be altered in time, speed or sequence, or that an image can arrive from a distance. Without training in sensory cynicism, we cannot possibly learn to deal with this. It will take generations to let go of our genetically coded tendency to soak up all images as though they are 100 percent real. And think if we do manage to do that, what will we have? Creatures who cannot believe in their senses and who take everything as it comes, since nothing can be directly experienced (1984).

Without the human bias toward belief, the media could not exist. What's more, because the bias is so automatic and unnoticed, the media, *all* media, are in a position to exploit the belief, to encourage you to believe in their questionable sensory information. This bias to believe has commercial value for the media since it allows them to keep your attention, as though it were south-flying birds you were seeing. The media, all media but particularly moving-image media,

which present data so nearly natural, effectively convert our naïve and automatic trust in the reliability of images into their own authority.